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ABSTRACT

Acknowledging that the Suggestopedia approach is not very popular, this paper focuses on the use of Suggestopedia's distinctive features to promote awareness of the linguistic and cultural features of the target culture in a language class. The role of the classroom environment in this approach is also examined. The context considered here is a heritage education class for adult first-generation Indian-Americans. The student population is described, and the choice of the Suggestopedia approach for this class is explained. Classroom procedures using the approach are described briefly. The significance of the seating arrangement, the role and conduct of the non-native teacher, rationale for selection of the syllabus, and selection of audiovisual materials are considered. It is concluded that when appropriately used, adapted to the learners' needs, and integrated with the curriculum, the Suggestopedia approach has significant potential for language teaching and learning. Some limitations of the approach, including limitations with young children and lack of communicative language use, are noted. (MSE)

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Cultural Consciousness in a Language Class

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Cultural Consciousness in a Language Class

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This paper explores how a pedagogic approach can contribute to language acquisition by being more than a mere vehicle for transmitting relevant linguistic material. It describes the effective use of Suggestopedia in a language class where the distinctive features of this approach are used to promote linguistic and cultural awareness of the target culture. By highlighting the significance of Suggestopedia, which is not a very popular approach, the paper also attempts to show how the effectiveness of an approach in language pedagogy is related to the various variables that constitute the context of the language class. Suggestopedia succeeded in the observed class as it addressed the needs of the students besides reflecting the cultural nuances of the target culture through its various distinctive features.

The primary objective of this paper is to present an analysis of a language class where the teaching method took into account the crucial and unavoidable link between language and culture. Culture, in this context, signifies a set of beliefs, customs, and social values that are shared by the individuals of the society in which the target language operates. Research in the field of cross-cultural variation in language use, and sociolinguistics has clearly demonstrated how language learning remains incomplete if divorced from its sociocultural setting. The significance of communicative competence was highlighted by Dell Hymes who observed that simply knowing the linguistic rules does not guarantee effective communication. It is important for a language learner not only to know how to form linguistically correct utterances but also to know when, where and how to respond.

However, in today's world of language pedagogy that is shaped to meet the specific needs of the learners in the most efficient manner, the relevance of mastering the sociolinguistic rules is determined by the needs of the learners. For instance, students learning a language for academic purposes, such as being able to read and write in research journals, would not be required to know the sociolinguistic rules. On the other hand, it becomes absolutely essential to master the sociolinguistic skills when the language

is learnt for communicative purposes and for survival within the target culture. This is because "language and culture are not independent or mutually exclusive..." Rather, culture is a wider system that completely includes language as a subsystem" (Casson 1981: 19). Language functions as an effective index which indicates the social norms of the target culture. Consequently, in language teaching "sociolinguistic competence has been identified as a key aspect of successful communication; background knowledge and shared assumptions have been shown to be a crucial element in understanding oral and written forms of discourse" (Kramsch 1989: 486).

This paper examines a language class where the inevitable link between language and culture was brought to the surface by the teaching methodology. In the observed class the methodology itself became an effective channel through which linguistic as well as sociocultural information was imparted in ways that were pertinent to the needs of the learners. This report focuses on this aspect by highlighting the explicit and implicit ways by which cultural awareness was being conveyed through the methodology.

The Observed Class

The class which I observed had adult learners who did not know their heritage language. Though there parents were from India, these students were American as they were born and raised in the US, a predominantly English speaking country. They had not found an opportunity to interact in their heritage language. Most of them had a passive knowledge of the target language, which was their heritage language, as they had heard some members of their family speak it. Their exposure to the target culture was minimal.

In this high intermediate level class, the proficiency level of the students in the different areas (oral, aural, reading and writing) varied. However, most of them could understand the language though some had difficulty in speaking and writing. All of them knew the script and were able to read the text with different degrees of proficiency. Most of them were not learning the language for academic purposes, nor did they need to focus on strategies of communication. Their main interest in the target language was governed by their desire to get a glimpse of the target culture of which they had little awareness.

Teaching Methodology

Over the past years a number of teaching methodologies have been formulated. Each is designed around a particular theory of language and adopted according to the needs of the learner. For instance, the Grammar Translation Method is used by those who feel that language is a "system of structurally related elements... [and the] target of the language learning is the acquisition of elements that are defined in terms of grammatical units"

(Richards and Rodgers 1982: 153). Another approach which has gained immense popularity in language classrooms in most parts of the world, is the Communicative Approach. This style of language teaching focuses on developing the communicative as well as the linguistic competence of the learners through interactive language lessons. The popularity of this approach can be traced to the growing realization of the significance of communicative competence. It would be futile for practitioners of any of these approaches to claim that any one method is the right method of language teaching. The appropriateness of any approach would be determined by its ability to meet the needs of the learners in the most effective manner. Hence for optimum language to occur in a classroom the teacher has to select, adapt and integrate the most appropriate aspects of any one or even different approaches. None of the approaches are inherently good or bad. The advantages and disadvantages of each becomes evident through its proper or improper application within a classroom. The paper will now discuss an approach that is rarely used, and will attempt to highlight how the mutual appropriacy of a context (that takes into account various features like the needs of the learners and their age) and a pedagogic approach together facilitate language learning.

In the observed class, the teacher drew extensively from an approach called Suggestopedia. This method of teaching was developed by Georgi Lozanov (1978), a Bulgarian psychiatrist educator. This approach "believes that relaxation techniques and concentration will help learners tap their subconscious resources and retain greater amounts of vocabulary and structures than they ever thought possible" (Omaggio 1986: 84).

Some of the major characteristics of this method are enumerated below:

a) stress on oral skills

b) use of situational dialogues

c) brief grammar explanations following language practice

d) comfortable sitting and soft music, usually of stringed instruments, to relate the mind

e) no mechanical drilling, rather encouraging role plays and providing the students an opportunity to absorb the text by concentrating on it.

Relevance of Suggestopedia

The practice of this method proved fruitful in this language class. This was because it allowed the incorporation of texts, such as plays, which were effective linguistic devices that conveyed the social norms and attitudes of the target language's culture. As already mentioned, the students were not learning the language for academic purposes. Hence, proficiency in syntax was a secondary goal. The brief and specific grammar explana-

tions that Suggestopedia allowed were enough to meet the students' needs. What was most fascinating was the manner in which, the other characteristics of Suggestopedia (besides a play which they used as their text) in a very subtle way, brought to life the target language's cultural ethos in the classroom. In this Hindi (the national language of India) class, Suggestopedia had a special significance because it employs certain activities that have a direct link with the Indian culture. Consequently, what appears mystical about this method in the western culture becomes quite explicable in an Indian context. In this class the method of instruction itself became an implicit means by which certain concepts of the student's heritage culture were introduced in an unobtrusive way.

Suggestopedia encourages the learners to engage in controlled breathing exercises that are meant to regulate the concentration level of the learners. This aspect of Suggestopedia is related to the yogic exercises that were originally performed by the Indian Yogis. It is from "raja-yoga [that] Lozanov has borrowed and modified techniques for alerting states of consciousness and concentration and use of rhythmic breathing " (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 142). This interesting feature about this approach was not pointed out by the teacher in the observed classes. However, it could have been mentioned in the earlier classes. Such a discussion on the relation between the pedagogic approach and the target language's culture can enable students to appreciate Suggestopedia as a meaningful channel for not only linguistic learning but also cultural insight.

One of the distinct characteristics of Suggestopedia is the 'concert' phase. The purpose of this phase is to create a peaceful ambiance within the classroom that can enable learners to relax their minds and concentrate. The lilting strains of the stringed instruments playing the Baroque melodies is an integral part of Suggestopedia, as it supposedly facilitates optimum learning. In the observed class, the teacher replaced Baroque music by Indian classical music. He switched on a cassette of a stringed Indian musical instrument. The mellow music that wafted into the room served a dual purpose. Firstly, it became a part of the pedagogic approach and was intended to make the students relax in a pleasant atmosphere and hear the target language with full concentration. Secondly and more interestingly, it also served to familiarize the students with the target culture in a non-pedagogical manner. The role of music in this class was more than a mechanical adoption of a particular feature of an approach. It offered the students an opportunity to listen, identify and appreciate their target culture's musical heritage in a foreign land. This in itself, was felt to be an enriching experience for these students who were learning the language for a better and holistic understanding of their target culture. The classroom thus provided them with an opportunity to get acquainted as well as cultivate their taste in the target culture's vast and rich musical heritage.

When the teacher initiated the "concert phase", he repeatedly asked his students to relax. He told them that they should forget all their worries

and put their faith in him. He stressed the fact that they were no longer in a competitive atmosphere. The cultural relevance of this last advice was significant. It would appear pertinent to many of those who are new to the US and find the competitive atmosphere in the academic institutions here extremely culturally specific. At least in this class the teacher, however unintentionally, created an academic atmosphere that largely resembled the one which prevails in the target country. However, the teacher, himself being a part of the American culture "that is characterized by competitiveness...and encourages individual accomplishment" (Cantoni-Harvey 1987: 6) was perhaps unable to identify the culturally relevant impact of his remarks and make the students conscious of it.

The Classroom

It was a small class and was held in the teacher's office in a very relaxed and informal atmosphere. The seating arrangement as well as the unobtrusive role of the teacher contributed to the comfortable environment. It was not a teacher fronted class for the students along with their teacher sat comfortably in a circle on the floor. This kind of seating arrangement was not only suited for this class which read a play, but was also a reflection of the classical classroom settings in the target culture and can still be found in certain traditional academic institutions in the target country (for instance in Vishva Bharati at Shantiniketan, which was founded by the Nobel award winner for literature, Rabindranath Tagore). Such an arrangement, that is reminiscent of the target language's ancient educational tradition lent a specific cultural aura to the modern classroom. This probably remained imperceptible to most as they had limited exposure to the target culture.

The teacher sat in front of a card which on translation read "Prof. Chatterbox", a role which he played only when asked to clarify certain doubts or when in charge of a game. He successfully juggled the roles of a "consultant, diagnostician, guide and model for learning" (Richards and Rodgers 1982: 160). It was interesting to note that though the teacher was not a native speaker of the language, he tried to represent the culture as much as possible through his dress (he wore an Indian Khadi jacket) and manners.

It was indeed to the credit of the non-native teacher that he was able to equip his students with relevant cultural information in spite of his peculiar position. I regarded this as a clear indication of his love for the language which had encouraged him to know more about the target culture. Moreover, as he and the students shared the same sociocultural assumptions, he was in a better position than a native speaker to anticipate the notions which would need clarification. Realizing that his students were not familiar with their target country's rural lifestyle he showed them video clippings of the rural areas and showed them the kind of houses they would

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have to stay in and the manner in which they would have to conduct themselves if they ever went to a similar place.

Syllabus

The students read a play in class that was set in the target country. Each student was given a part and the roles were switched after approximately ten minutes. This switching of roles enabled the students to practice the different intonation patterns associated with the different characters. This had relevance because the intonation patterns varied as they were determined by the roles the characters had within the family and society.

In the play one of the characters, a young Indian woman who was born and raised in the US, was visiting India for the first time. The play highlighted certain sociocultural notions of the target culture which appeared peculiar to her. The play was a good choice as the students very easily identified with this character and through her eyes were able to get a glimpse of the Indian culture. Like her, they too were provided with explanations and justifications for many of the social practices. It also provoked interesting conversation as the play addressed the very ideas that these students wanted to talk about. The topics that were discussed ranged from rural lifestyle to the concept of arranged marriages. However, most of it was unfortunately not in the target language.

From this text the students also learned other appropriate discourse strategies. For instance, they saw how request patterns varied with the different social roles of the requester and the obligor. The text of the play also brought to attention the need for an awareness of the different forms of politeness which exist in India.

Audio - Visual Mode

After the students and teacher had read and discussed the play, a video clipping of the discussed portion was shown. It lasted for 20 minutes and kept the students totally engrossed. By watching this film the learners got an opportunity to hear the correct intonation patterns and the native pronunciation. In a later class I found the students trying to imitate the manner in which the dialogues were delivered in the play. Moreover, the film became a successful vehicle that transported the sights, sounds and atmosphere of the Indian countryside into a foreign classroom.

The video began with a song which had simple lyrics that described the simplicity of rural life. Men and women worked in the fields where machines were a rare sight. It presented a society which was not yet completely industrialized. Through the film the students were also made sensitive to the manner in which the people of their heritage culture treat time. Unlike the fast pace of life that characterizes American society, the Indian lifestyle both in the cities and country side was shown to be more relaxed. Family members were seen spending a lot of time together, sitting and talking. The video showed how even in the middle of the day, the head of

the village could be found relaxing in his house smoking a *hookah* (pipe).

All these aspects, however trivial they might appear, were significant signals which imparted a cultural awareness to these students. For this class, the use of the audio-visual technique was indeed beneficial. It facilitated a kind of cultural awareness among the learners that was impossible for the teacher to precipitate otherwise through simple lectures.

Conclusion

Observation of such a class makes one realize the potential that is inherent in an appropriately utilized pedagogic approach for language teaching and learning. The manner in which the pedagogic approach was adapted to suit the needs of the learners in this class indicates the advantages of Suggestopedia. This approach worked in the observed class as it was integrated as part of the curriculum itself, both of which were mutually interrelated. It becomes crucial for the teacher to adopt an approach that has maximum relevance for the students. As was observed in the given class, the characteristics underlying a pedagogic approach can become effective tools in promoting the objectives of language learning. Suggestopedia was used in this class not only as a pedagogic tool to promote effective language acquisition but the approach itself contributed to the learning process.

Although Suggestopedia, which finds very few practitioners, worked as an appropriate approach in this class, it continues to have various limitations. For instance, this approach can perhaps work effectively only with adult students as young children would not be able to follow the teacher's instructions properly. Moreover, this method did not allow the students of this class to use language creatively for it should not be forgotten that after all it was a language class intended to impart cultural knowledge and not vice-versa. They were just memorizing set phrases which they encountered in the text they were studying. It is true they were learning a good amount of vocabulary but they hardly got an opportunity to utilize it. Suggestopedia seemed to prove effective in helping the students memorize vocabulary. It was not possible to learn if the students got an opportunity to communicate in the classroom using the learned vocabulary due to the limited number of class observations. Inclusion of simple communicative activities like role playing could also be included in this class for promoting communicative competence.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to highlight all the interactions that operated in this culturally conscious language class. The focus has been mainly on those aspects which served to heighten the sociocultural awareness of these students. In today's world that necessitates intercultural communication, it has become absolutely essential for everybody to be able to communicate holistically. For this reason sociocultural competence has become an integral part of linguistic competence and this was realized in this class.

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